

Policy Brief

Denial of Academic Freedom Exposed: The Case of Academics for Peace in Turkey

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Abstract

Lack of academic freedom has always been a hallmark of the Turkish higher education system. Any de facto respect for it has been wrenched from the Turkish state apparatus (including the government, the military and the YÖK) as a result of resistance by academics and students alike. A salient fact about Turkish higher education is that universities that have toed the government line have remained poor performers, whereas those where staff and students showed resistance to state intrusion have done better in terms of research quality, graduate employability and international recognition. Nevertheless, successive AKP governments since 2003, with Erdoğan as prime minister or president, have been determined to maintain the long-standing state tutelage over Turkey's higher education system. The expected prize is the production of graduates disposed to submit to authority – particularly state authority – without much questioning.

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Denial of Academic Freedom Exposed: The Case of Academics for Peace in Turkey

On 10 January this year, a group of scholars calling themselves Academics for Peace signed an open letter calling on the Turkish government to end its violence in Kurdish provinces. In line with their aim of studying peace and conflict-resolution processes worldwide, the academics also called for “a road map that would lead to a lasting peace in Turkey” and for independent observers to monitor the Kurdish provinces, where civilians, including children and the elderly, are still being killed under a security crackdown.

The “Petition for Peace” was signed by 1,128 academics in Turkey and beyond. The next day, Turkish president Recep Tayyip Erdoğan accused the signatories and the organisers of treason and called for them to be punished. Immediately afterwards, the judiciary initiated public prosecutions under Turkish anti-terror law alleging defamation of the Turkish state and accusing the signatories of spreading “terrorist organisation propaganda”. After an emergency meeting, Turkey’s Higher Education Council (YÖK) ordered university rectors to commence disciplinary investigations. Numerous suspensions, dismissals and imprisonments have followed.

To long-term observers of Turkey such as myself, none of this came as a great surprise. Lack of academic freedom has always been a hallmark of the Turkish higher education system. Any de facto respect for it has been wrenched from the Turkish state apparatus (including the government, the military and the YÖK) as a result of resistance by academics and students alike.

A salient fact about Turkish higher education is that universities that have toed the government line have remained poor performers, whereas those where staff and students showed resistance to state intrusion have done better in terms of research quality, graduate employability and international recognition. Nevertheless, successive AKP governments since 2003, with Erdoğan as prime minister or president, have been determined to maintain the long-standing state tutelage over Turkey’s higher education system. The expected prize is the production of graduates disposed to submit to authority – particularly state authority – without much questioning.

I did my first degree in Turkey in the second half of the 1970s, at a time of widespread student activism. I was involved in two long-term boycotts of classes and exams (one lasting for six months and one for nine) demanding the withdrawal of troops from campus, respect for academic freedom and adoption of the standards in the [International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights](#).

Although the covenant entered into force in many countries in January 1976, Turkey refused to sign it until 2000 – two years before the AKP came to power. It was ratified in June 2003, but subject to [three reservations](#). One of these allows Turkey to interpret the right to education and academic freedom in accordance with certain articles of the Turkish Constitution. These specify that “the Turkish state, with its territory and nation, is an indivisible entity”; that “the freedom of education and training does not relieve the individual from loyalty to the constitution”; and that “no language other than Turkish shall be taught as a mother tongue to Turkish citizens at any institution of education and training”.

This means that any argument in favour of a multi-ethnic and multilingual polity can constitute a criminal offence, depending on the political whims of the government of the day. This official fixation with a unitarian/nationalist conception of statehood meant that both the right to education and academic freedom suffered both before and after the ascendance of the AKP to power.

The denial of academic freedom was [enshrined in law](#) in 1981 by Turkey’s military rulers. This law, which remains in force, means that university rectors or the YÖK can directly initiate dismissal proceedings against staff and students without objective criteria for implementation. Academics dismissed because of political activity may also be banned from holding any position in the public sector. The law was invoked by the YÖK and rectors to expel academics who refused to toe the military’s line, and was also used in the late 1990s to manipulate universities and secure [obedience to political authority](#).

In 2003, the AKP government introduced four draft laws on higher education. These stipulated that the aim of the education system is to produce “individuals...who accept the Turkish Republic and its people as an individual unity” and that universities should be responsible for “establishing in students a service consciousness allied with Atatürkist nationalism”. None of the draft laws provided for any amendment to [article 4 of the 1981 act](#), which also provides that the

aim of higher education is to “educate students so that they...will be conscious of the privilege of being a Turk” and “enhance the welfare of the Turkish State as a whole, conducive to national and territorial indivisibility”. In a [2004 report on academic freedom](#) in Turkish higher education, Human Rights Watch said that the draft laws would only perpetuate the YÖK as a guardian of political orthodoxy.

Although the laws were ultimately vetoed by the president, successive AKP governments have continued to [violate the right to academic freedom](#) on the basis of existing legislation. A report for Turkey’s Foundation for Political, Economic and Social Research, published last year, notes that Turkish academics tend to believe that academic freedom does not exist in their country and that the legal provisions leave ample room for politically motivated interventions. The report, *From Past to Present: Academic Freedom in Turkey*, cites a number of worrying incidents, including a 2005 investigation of an associate professor from [Hacettepe University](#) in Ankara for his research on forced Kurdish migration and a 2012 investigation of a law professor at Akdeniz University in Antalya for asking an exam question on homosexuality. In 2014, a new clause was introduced into universities’ government-dictated disciplinary procedures requiring academics to obtain permission beforehand – and making them subject to possible punishment regardless – if they issue statements considered to be “non-academic” to the press. And, late last year, the YÖK was [given powers to close private universities](#) “that have become a focal point for activities against the state’s indivisible integrity”.

This brings us to the current witch-hunt against Academics for Peace. As of 30 March, there had been 533 “administrative investigations” and 159 legal investigations into signatories of the letter, [according to Academics for Peace](#). There had also been 38 dismissals, 30 suspensions and 38 detentions.

Furthermore, on 15 March, three members of Academics for Peace were jailed for announcing they would start an “academic vigil”. These were Esra Mungan, an expert in cognitive psychology at [Boğaziçi University](#); Kivanç Ersoy, a mathematician at Mimar Sinan Fine Arts University; and Muzaffer Kaya, a political scientist formerly at Nişantaşı University (all three institutions are in Istanbul). The court also requested the arrest of Meral Camcı, formerly of Istanbul’s Yeni Yüzyıl University. This was not possible at the time because she was in France, but she was sent to prison on 1 April on her return.

A computer scientist and UK citizen, Chris Stephenson of the private Bilgi University in Istanbul, was also detained for holding a vigil outside the court in support of the jailed academics and for carrying in his bag invitations to a Newroz (a Kurdish new year festival) from a parliamentary party. As [reported in Times Higher Education](#), Stephenson was accused of handing out propaganda for the outlawed Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) and was deported, although he was later permitted to return – due, presumably, to the bad publicity that his treatment had generated (“Academics call for end to ‘witch-hunt’ of scholars in Turkey”, News, 24 March).

As for the other detainees, the [Academics for Peace website indicates](#) that Mungan was initially held in solitary confinement. Kaya and Ersoy are reportedly still suffering the same fate, without access to books and having been strip searched and kept naked for 20 minutes on arrival at the prison.

Thousands of academics from all continents – including myself – reacted to the witch-hunt by signing a number of petitions calling on the Turkish government and the international community to stop the persecutions and ensure respect for academic freedom. Some of the letters of support have been published in *THE* (on [28 January](#) and [24 March](#)), as well as in a number of the media outlets in Turkey that the government has not yet silenced.

Nevertheless, the calls have fallen on deaf ears and, on 25 March, the chief adviser to the president, Yalcin Topcu, took the attack to a new level by [accusing the academics of plotting a coup](#) to impose the will of the unelected “over the will of those elected by the nation”.

The Turkish government and the president must be held accountable for persecuting members of Academics for Peace – not to mention the civilian deaths and large-scale destruction in Kurdish towns and cities that precipitated their petition in the first place. A prominent German scholar of international law, Norman Paech of the [University of Hamburg](#), has declared the state violence to be beyond all norms of international law and has vowed to set up an [alternative international court](#) to rule on it if the United Nations' International Court of Justice fails to carry out its duties.

Western governments have a historical pattern of appeasing Turkey – always with devastating consequences. During the First World War, Germany struck an alliance with the Ottoman Empire and the world witnessed the latter's massacre of the Armenians. During the Second World War,

France and the UK appeased Turkey and, in return, they got tacit support for the Nazi war machine until Hitler was about to be defeated. This was not because history was repeating itself but because the reflex of the Turkish state remained more or less the same: hostility to political dissent and obsession with preserving a pecking order in which minorities are subservient to a nationalist conception of statehood. President Erdoğan's [recent comments](#) on the effectiveness of Hitler's regime illustrate much the same point.

But even if Western governments remain silent in their naive belief that Turkey is a strategic partner in fighting terrorism and stemming the refugee crisis, there is no need for Western academics to do likewise. It is time for the international scholarly community to take practical, meaningful steps to express their solidarity with Academics for Peace and their commitment to academic freedom more broadly. These could include declining invitations to conferences held in Turkey or withdrawing from cooperation with Turkish universities based on the partner institution's track record in defending their scholars' right to speak out.

Academic freedom is a precious gift, and those who have it should do all they can to extend it to those who do not.

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